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The C.M. and the Vincentian Family

by Benjamín Romo, C.M.

Delegate for the Vincentian Family

10.VII.2004

The ministry and service to the Vincentian Family is rooted in the very experience of our Founder, who not only worked with the laity during his whole life but also allowed himself to be evangelized by them. Our Constitutions, when speaking about the end of the Congregation of the Mission, state most clearly that this end is achieved when the members make every effort to put on the Spirit of Jesus Christ, evangelizing the poor and they *help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor*.¹ Since the formulation of our Constitutions in 1980, the formation of the laity has become one of the three ways in which the single end of the Congregation of the Mission is achieved. We live our vocation as missionaries and imitate St. Vincent when we help the laity live their proper vocation, i.e., their vocation as baptized persons who live in the midst of the world and build up the Kingdom of God.

Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M., Superior General, closed the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission in 1998 with the following words: *Go, tell the confreres confidently that with the members of our family we can be an enormous force in the service of the poor*.² The Congregation of the Mission has worked very hard during these past six years in its attempts to actualize this missionary reality. Today we pause to review what has been accomplished and, based on our experience, we move forward and take on new actions and commitments on behalf of the laity.

My presentation this afternoon has two parts. In the first section I want to present to you the principal activities of the Vincentian Family, activities in which we have participated. Then I want to look toward the future and will use the following question as a starting point: What can still be done *with and for* Vincentian laywomen and laymen? As I attempt to respond to this question, I invite you this afternoon, to look toward the horizon with me. I will do my part and will present you with some proposals and commitments.

¹ Constitutions and Statutes, Article 1.3.

² *Vincentiana* 42 (1998) 401.

1. The road that we have travelled

During a meeting of the Vincentian Family in 1994, Fr. Maloney made the following reflection: If the Daughters of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission and the numerous Vincentian Associations that are present in more than 130 countries, if these groups joined together their charismatic energies and resources, then they would be able to live their Vincentian and Christian vocation more faithfully and they would be more effective in their commitment to evangelizing the poor. This was indeed “a prophetic intuition” that he has shared with all the members of the Vincentian Family during these past few years. This encouragement and gentle nudging has led to a greater knowledge of and collaboration among the distinct branches of the Vincentian Family and has provided for the formation of the membership and the service and the evangelization of the poor. This “intuition” was so decisive that it constituted the theme of our 39th General Assembly that was held in 1998: *The Worldwide Vincentian Family and the Challenges for the Mission in the Third Millennium*. Before that Assembly, but especially in the years following the Assembly, this ministry to the larger Vincentian Family has received greater and greater attention. Many confreres, with renewed enthusiasm and creativity, have dedicated a great part of their time to create, form, and consolidate the Vincentian Lay Associations working on behalf of the poor.

2. Dedication of a confrere to the International Vincentian Family

Responding to the suggestion of the 1998 General Assembly, Fr. Maloney nominated a confrere to be his representative to the International Vincentian Family. In 1999 he created in the General Curia the Office of the Vincentian Family. From that moment I have dedicated all my time to encouraging, forming and coordinating some of the branches of the Vincentian Family with whom we, as a Congregation, have very close collaboration. Among these are: AIC, SSVP, AMM, JMV, and MISEVI. I have done this work by carrying out two tasks:

2.1. Correspondence and formation

At the office I respond to the numerous letters that arrive here from the Associations of the Vincentian Family located in different countries. This correspondence has increased with the passing of each day. At the same time, this exchange of letters creates networks and offers information, orientation and encouragement to the Vincentian groups as well as individual Vincentians. Fr. Orlando Escobar, Director of *Nuntia* and *Vincentiana*, has provided an invaluable service in this work of handling the correspondence.

During the past two years, one of the secretaries at the General Curia has provided two hours of her time every day to the organization of the archive and helping with the correspondence. A great part of our office work is dedicated to the preparation of material that can be utilized in the formation of the Vincentian Associations. Other staff members have offered their time to assist in the formation of the participants of the CIF Program or other Associations or Congregations that periodically request our accompaniment in the area of Vincentian spiritual formation. A great deal of my time is also spent collaborating in the preparation of the International Meetings.

2.2. Visits to the Associations of the Vincentian Family in distinct parts of the world

From this office I prepare for my visits to the Associations of the Vincentian Family in distinct countries. The work has been very useful for the countries visited and has provided an impulse for their growth, their spiritual formation and the coordination of the distinct branches of the Family. During the past five years I have visited the Vincentian Family in 35 countries on four continents. It seemed advisable to visit 11 of these countries a second time in order to reinforce the work that had been started. I express my profound thanks to the national coordinators of the Vincentian Family in those countries who have invited me to visit them. I am also grateful to the Visitors who have supported and promoted these meetings, and to the Visitatrixes of the Daughters of Charity and the sisters of the provinces for their valuable collaboration.

Limitations. I recognize the fact that because of my own limitations in the area of language and because of time factors, the English-speaking countries have received less help than other parts of the world. I believe a more focused work in the English-speaking world is a pending task that must be carried out during the next few years. At the same time, this lack of language skills has limited my communication with individual people and national associations in several countries. Remember, the Vincentian Family is present in more than 130 different countries.

Through frequent communication with the Superior General, I have been able to accomplish this work of encouraging and collaborating with the Lay Associations of the Vincentian Family. Fr. Maloney has given me much support and orientation. I thank him and the members of the General Council who have given me the opportunity to serve the laity in this way at this stage in my life. During these years I have had the privilege of working shoulder-to-shoulder with the lay leaders of the International Vincentian Family. In all honesty, I can say that it has been very easy for me to carry on this collaboration with the Vincentian Family, though I must in all

humility admit here that, because of a lack of time, I have not always been able to collaborate in the way that had been requested of me, nor has my collaboration always been qualitatively good or sufficiently profound.

3. The principal activities of the Congregation of the Mission in collaboration with the Vincentian Family during the past six years

3.1. Five years marked by great events

1999 - Foundation of the International Secretariat of the Vincentian Marian Youth Groups. Madrid provided a space for the work of the International Secretariat of the Vincentian Marian Youth groups. It provided office space and housing for the volunteers, who offer three years of service to the Association. The volunteers come from distinct parts of the world. A provisional International Council was formed and it immediately began its work: encouraging the Association in various countries and preparing for the First International Assembly of the organization. Many countries submitted their National Statutes that year and by the following year more than half of the groups had submitted these documents.

2000 - First General Assembly of the Vincentian Marian Youth groups and the Vincentian Youth Meeting. During the beginning of this year, much work was done in preparation for the First General Assembly of this organization which was immediately followed by the Vincentian Youth Meeting that was held to celebrate the 15th World Youth Day and the Jubilee Year. These meetings took place here in Rome. The Assembly resulted in the election of the First International Council and the publication of a Final Document that presented lines of action to the National Associations — lines of action to be implemented over the next five years. The Vincentian Youth Meeting brought together 1,800 young people from 52 different countries and distinct Vincentian Associations. Together they proclaimed their faith in Jesus Christ who calls them to serve the poor in imitation of St. Vincent de Paul. From this moment, the World Youth Day celebration has become an opportunity for the Vincentian youth from all parts of the world to come together once again.

2001 - Constitutive Assembly of MISEVI. In January 2001, in the city of Madrid, the Constitutive Assembly of a new branch of the Vincentian Family took place. This youngest and smallest member of the family is called MISEVI (Lay Vincentian Missionaries). This was the “second prophetic intuition” of Fr. Maloney, namely, that it is possible to live the missionary vocation *ad gentes* as a lay person committed to the Vincentian charism. They must be offered the

possibility of participating for a specified period of time, in an organized and stable way, in the missions *ad gentes* that have been entrusted to the Congregation of the Mission and/or the Daughters of Charity.

2001 - First International Meeting of the Leaders of the Association of the Miraculous Medal. Convoled by the Superior General through the Visitors and the Visitatrixes and with the theme: *AMM: A New Image for a New Millennium*, 72 participants gathered in Rome (Vincentian missionaries, Daughters of Charity and lay members of the Association). Their objective: "To reflect together on the message of the apparitions at the Rue du Bac and examine how to organize the formation, the apostolate, the spread of this message and the economic resources of the Association." The fruit of this meeting can be found in the Final Document that outlines the direction that should be followed in order to strengthen and make better known the AMM in the distinct countries. The Document asked for the creation of an International Coordinating Council. A few months later the Superior General constituted it.

2002 - Vincentian Month for the Advisors of the Vincentian Family. In July, in the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, 110 Vincentian missionaries and Daughters of Charity from 28 different countries came together for three weeks of ongoing formation. The primary objective of this time together was to offer a better service of accompaniment to the lay groups of the Vincentian Family. *Vincentiana* published a special edition dedicated to this theme. This was the first experience of this kind on an international level and it will surely be repeated.

2003 - International Meeting of the Lay Vincentian Missionaries (MISEVI). During the month of August, in the city of Mexico, 78 members of the Vincentian Family gathered together. In large part, they were lay persons who were interested in MISEVI. They came from 26 different countries and had a stated objective: seek ways to spread and encourage the establishment of MISEVI in their respective countries. The meeting resulted in the publication of valuable material (informational and educational) that has just been published in Spanish by Editorial La Milagrosa. The Final Document that outlines the commitments for the Association has also been published.

3.2. Ten meetings of the leaders of the International Vincentian Family

The Vincentian Family, through its international leaders, has come together on numerous occasions. These meetings have been key to the collaboration and organization of common projects. The four principal branches of the Vincentian Family met together for the

first time on 2 June 1995, in Paris: the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, the St. Vincent de Paul Society and the International Association of Charities. These meetings have continued to be held at the beginning of each year and last for about three days. They have created an atmosphere where experiences are shared and now other Vincentian groups have joined this meeting: Vincentian Marian Youth, MISEVI and the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul. These annual meetings are moments for prayer, reflection and study focused on the problem of poverty in the world. As a result of these gatherings, the groups have accepted commitments and organized activities on behalf of the Vincentian Family and the poor. Some concrete actions that they have taken are the following:

- The preparation of a booklet that describes the distinct branches of the Vincentian Family, published by *Vincentiana*;
- The writing of a Manifesto: *In the Name of the Poor*, through which the Vincentian Family had its voice heard during the Jubilee Year;
- The establishment of a “Day of Common Prayer” for the Vincentian Family;
- Vincentian Month for the advisors of the Vincentian Family;
- Mutual support during times of emergency and catastrophes;
- Promotion of “collaborative projects” of the distinct branches of the Vincentian Family;
- Redaction of a common prayer for the Vincentian Family;
- Realization of the project: “The Globalization of Charity: The Fight Against Hunger”;
- Political Action Campaign against Malaria.

3.3. The formation of the members of the distinct Associations

The Vincentian laity ask us to provide them with formation. This is their urgent and very clear request. Many positive steps have been taken in this regard:

- The organization of Vincentian formation seminars with themes focused on Vincentian spirituality and action;
- The establishment of Vincentian formation schools and the realization of seminars dealing with the Social Doctrine of the Church and other themes;

- Initiation of collaborative programs of Vincentian formation: meetings on the national and regional level and special formation for lay leaders;
- Availability of more formation material as well as information concerning the branches of the Family — information which is shared by all the branches;
- The website of the Vincentian Family has become an informational and educational instrument for the confreres and is also a meeting place where the formation of the members of the Vincentian Family occurs. Many branches have designed their own websites;
- Publication of material for the distinct branches, e.g., *Document for the Advisors of the International Association of Charities*, *Role and Tasks of the Advisors to the Vincentian Marian Youth*, etc.

Many documents, books, booklets, magazines and articles have been written and these are very useful for the formation of the members of the distinct Associations of the Vincentian Family. Today, we can say that each Association has its own materials and uses these materials when it establishes itself in a new area of a country. These materials also provide for the Vincentian spiritual formation of the members and equip the members to carry out their apostolate among the poor.

3.4. What has been done on the level of collaboration?

Collaboration among the distinct branches of the Vincentian Family is truly a reality today. *Mutual knowledge* and *common formation* has led to the actualization of common projects of evangelization and service of the poor. I mention the following facts as an example:

- Many forums have been created to study and reflect on the different forms of poverty in the distinct countries in order to search for practical and effective solutions;
- In many countries a National Coordinating Group of the Vincentian Family has been set up;
- More than 160 projects have come to the Vincentian Family Office in response to *The Globalization of Charity: The Fight Against Hunger*. More than a 100 of them have been designed as collaborative projects among different branches of the Vincentian Family;
- The Political Action Project against Malaria is moving forward slowly.

3.5. The Vincentian Charism and Youth

If we look at the progress of the Family during recent years, we can see the promotion of the charism has been emphasized for young people.

In his final remarks to the 1998 Assembly members, the Superior General encouraged them to work with the young. He said: *The future servants of the poor are the young. They are the evangelizers of the third millennium. They are the people who will visit the poor in their homes, who will carry out practical, concrete projects for the integral human promotion of those who are destitute. It is they who will teach people to read and write. It is they who will attack the causes of poverty.*³

In the Vincentian Family there is a clear conviction of being called to share the Vincentian charism especially among the younger generations. And so in the last international meeting of the leaders, it was decided to declare the year 2004-2005 as *The Year of Vincentian Youth*. The young are an area that needs our special attention as a Family, and why not say it, an explicit commitment as a Congregation.

4. The road that remains: what can we still do?

Trying to look toward the future, I could say that we are at the beginning of a road. If you allow me to think out loud, I will share with you some steps that, in my opinion, could be taken to consolidate in the Family a mature and adult laity who look for holiness by means of service to the poor.

4.1. On formation

Intensifying formation is fundamental. It is the basis of everything. It is that which forms us to give an efficacious response to the needs of the poor. Formation leads the laity to solidify their own identity. The Vincentian laity have a definite identity, their own charism which sinks its roots in the founders and manifests itself in the *here and now* of our history. It is vitally important to rediscover and deepen that identity in order to find our proper place in the world, in the Church and within the Vincentian Family. It seems to me that our task as missionaries who accompany the lay members of the Vincentian Family is one of helping the laity to discover and live this Vincentian identity and to promote a sense of belonging to the

³ In *Vincentiana* 42 (1998) 401

Family through a concrete association. Vincentian lay people, just like the Congregation of the Mission, need to take on an identity and commit themselves to a mission.

4.2. On lay Vincentian spirituality

Our Vincentian laity have grown, in great part in the shadow of the Vincentian spirituality developed by the consecrated persons who live the charism. I firmly believe that it is necessary to promote study and reflection on *lay Vincentian spirituality*, done by lay people themselves. I dream of seeing more Vincentian publications done by lay people for lay people: publications that show what it means to live the Vincentian charism in the midst of the world today. Our Vincentian laity can count on some very able people quite capable of doing this work; perhaps it is our job to encourage them to begin it.

4.3. On collaboration

We must learn better to work in an organized, collaborative way, on real and effective projects. A commitment to justice and charity today on the part of every Christian, and therefore on the part of the Vincentian Family, is urgent! We must organize and carry out this job together. The members of the last Assembly said: *We recognize, as members of the Congregation of the Mission, the need for a change of heart if we are to collaborate generously with other members of the Vincentian Family and so recognize the gifts and talents of others in promoting the reign of God.*⁴ This statement continues to be valid today and we still need a change of mentality in order to be collaborators and brothers, and not “bosses” or “owners.”

4.4. On being advisors

We should pay more attention to being advisors to the laity. We should do it as well as we can. This means that each province should have personnel who give sufficient time to this task. Today lay people ask us for a new style of accompaniment based on the ecclesiology of Vatican II, with communion and participation. We are called to promote the responsibility and leadership of the laity so they can become leaven for the Kingdom in the Church and in the world. We must also involve the lay people themselves in the ministry of being advisors. Our associations today have well trained members capable

⁴ 39th General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, Final Document III, I in *Vincentiana* 42 (1998) 392.

of being spiritual advisors and formators of other Vincentian lay groups. The accompaniment and advising of these groups is not a ministry reserved exclusively to the hierarchy.

4.5. On animation

We should continue our efforts to create national or regional Coordinating Commissions of the Vincentian Family. The experience of recent years has shown us that the places where Vincentian formation and service projects for the poor work best is in those provinces, countries, regions or dioceses that have a coordinating group for the different branches of the Vincentian Family. Would it be possible to have such coordinating groups in all the countries where we are now located? Right now we are in 38 countries, and I am convinced we can do more to organize such commissions.

4.6. On youth

We must share the Vincentian charism more and more with youth. The Vincentian charism is urgent for today's world. It is in our power to live it radically; it is our job to share it with others. Work with the lay members of the Vincentian Family continues to be a priority among our ministries. Sharing our charism with them, especially with the young, is an urgent task for our provinces. The international leaders of the Vincentian Family have told us this year: *We urge all the members of our various branches to reach out to young people and share with them simply and openly the charism of St. Vincent. It is an immensely attractive one: relevant, concrete, effective.*

* * *

I will conclude these reflections by telling you, the Vincentians of the 21st century that Jesus continues to extend to us the same invitation he made to the Samaritan: *Go and do likewise.*⁵ Go and learn about God through the service of the poor. Go, and help others in the Church and in the world to make their lives a constant encounter with Jesus Christ through the service of the poor. Go, and share with the laity the treasure of the charism with which St. Vincent has gifted us. Go, and learn from the laity to be authentic evangelisers of the poor.

⁵ Lk 10:39. Letter of 25 May 2004 to the Vincentian Family for the preparation of the "Day of Common Prayer" for the feast of St. Vincent in 2004, in *Vincentiana* 48 (2004) 129-138.